

No Animals Were Harmed in the Making of This Veal

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INTRODUCTION

I was raised on a conventional Jewish-American meat- and potato-based diet during my first two decades. In response to an emerging awareness of health risks related to my typical fare and exposure to alternative diets and, occasionally, the philosophies or dicta such as the feminism-rooted “the personal is political” supporting them, I embraced pescetarianism or pesce-vegetarianism/semi-vegetarianism in my twenties. In the ensuing years, as I’ve contemplated the implications for the broader food system and global environment of our food choices, I’m led to wonder whether more far-reaching and even universal changes in dietary practices are needed for the health and preservation of humanity, other species, and the planet.

ANALYSIS

A. Something Fishy Here

Our tastes are affected by genetics, culture, and environment, which are all impacted by larger political forces. We may absorb these varied influences and arrive at a conscientious approach to reacting to, rejecting, or accepting the conventional dietary standards of our culture. But even after considerable or through incessant deliberation or debate over the merits of dietary components, one’s culinary choices may appear to be the result of somewhat muddled thinking. That is, although the human species is purportedly distinguished by our ability to reason, we show great capacity for irrationality and inconsistency. Seventeenth century French philosopher René Descartes is perhaps best known for the dictum “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”). In other words, one might charge that my dietary patterns are more the result of rationalization than cogent rational decisions. I eat fish, but no beef, pork, poultry or any other flesh, as I do not want to contribute to the industrialized cruelty exhibited by modern factory farming. Is my drawing the line speciesistic or hypocritical? Is it even intelligible?

One classic defense for eating fish but no other meat is that fish (and crustaceans) do not feel pain. It is an argument that once held sway with me. But as David De Grazia has contended, this claim appears dubious, as fish and some invertebrates have been shown to react with aversion to painful stimuli. Pete Singer and Tom Regan’s arguments against the suffering of animals and in defense of animal rights are also compelling to me and strike me as applicable to all animals. James Rachels is also quite convincing in his “The Basic Argument for Vegetarianism” in finding the reasons cited to justify the harming of animals as insufficient. Their cases are founded on the base brutality of modern factory farming practices. My decision to include fish in my diet, however, was arrived at more inductively, and intuitively, than deductively and was more of a reaction against the inhumanity and abominable restriction of liberty

associated with factory farming and confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). While the actual suffering of livestock animals greatly distresses me, it is the greater freedom of fish and awareness of the health benefits of consuming some fish that have most impelled my choice to continue eating nonmammalian creatures of the sea. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the decline of certain fish species and prefer to eat fish that are sustainably harvested.

B. Where's the Beef?

Perhaps more important on a larger scale than what I've chosen to include in my diet is what I've excluded. I stopped eating beef, then pork and poultry, in my early twenties. While I do not shrilly react to friends and family who may eat cow meat in front of me, my sentiments are decidedly against the consumption of beef, in particular. I find the savage treatment of all livestock animals in factory farms to be abhorrent across the board, but the cattle and dairy industries deserve special mention because the impact of dairy farms and CAFOs that slaughter cows for beef are disproportionately contributing to the greatest existential threat to humanity and the planet—global climate change.

In addition to the harsh and unnatural physical treatment that cows endure in both the dairy and cattle industries simply in terms of confinement and well-documented abuse, gross inefficiencies, inequities, and health-threatening practices are introduced into the life cycles of these animals that ultimately pose serious risks to human beings (carnivore or not, and well beyond Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease) and the planet. To produce one pound of beef, it takes anywhere from seven to sixteen pounds of grain, which would be better used to feed the nearly one billion hungry people on the planet. Waste, if produced in the pasture, would recycle and fertilize the grasses. Instead, the sheer volume of excrement produced in dairy and beef operations poses significant environmental pollution, including run-off into rivers used for drinking water. In terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to and accelerate global climate change, a 20 percent reduction in beef consumption alone has been estimated to be the equivalent of exchanging all cars and trucks for Priuses (Robbins 2012).

Roger Scruton is no vegetarian. But he acknowledges the indignities and cruelties of what he terms “battery” farming of livestock and would like to see it end. His solution, though, is not to refrain from eating meat but to condone humane animal husbandry and smaller-scale family farm operations that allow for merciful stewardship of the animals until they are killed, humanely, for food and without the attendant terror recorded in undercover footage in documentary films such as *Food, Inc.* Scruton would endorse, then, the “family owned, multi-generational, pasture-based, beyond organic, local-market farm” of Joel and Teresa Salatin of Virginia (Polyface, Inc.), and Bill and Nicolette Niman (the Niman Ranch), as such humane practices are their stock in trade. Becoming a “conscientious carnivore” is Scruton’s suggestion, claiming that it is a duty of meat-eaters to “eat our friends,” or, in other words, to provide a humane alternative to the battery cages of factory farms. He theorizes that such practices, which folks should understand would cost more at first, could morph into a movement that would bring about the end of the factory farm.

Coff and *The Economist* writers would certainly disagree (Coff 2006; *The Economist* 2006) Taking a more cynical, jaded tack, they minimize the potential clout of consumers, contending that the shopping cart is no match for the ballot box. Coff does concede that consumer activism can get corporate manufacturers to budge, though. John Robbins notes several examples related to chocolate, with Ben & Jerry’s committing to using only Fair Trade Certified cocoa, and the United Kingdom’s Cadbury Dairy Milk ensuring that all of its chocolate is Fair Trade Certified (Robbins 2012).

But Robbins suggests that a consumer movement that displaces cattle from confinement to pasture in the vast stretches of the American west would still confer substantial environmental burdens. He cites Brazil and Amazonian deforestation, eighty percent of which is ascribed to free-range, grass-fed cattle ranching. In addition, he notes that the remaining 20 percent of Amazon deforestation is attributed to

land use for soy farming not for human consumption but animal feed shipped to China (Robbins 2012).

C. Got Antibiotics?

Nevertheless, factory farming is a more insidious scourge. Dairy cows are plied with genetically engineered growth hormones (banned in Canada, much of the European Union, Australia, and New Zealand) and antibiotics, and fed grains—often subsidized GMO corn—rather than the grasses on which they would normally graze (Robbins 2012). Their male offspring are often summarily killed or crated off to become veal. The steady diet of antibiotics for bovines—whether for dairy cows prone to udder infections due partly to induced overproduction as well as the use of bovine growth hormone itself or for beef cattle to help fight infections much more likely to occur because of cramped living quarters—more so than the overprescribed use in humans is responsible for drastically elevating the risk of engendering antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Feeding corn to cows also acidifies the pH-neutral digestive tracts of the bovine, creating an environment much more like the acidic human digestive tract and inuring microbes (e.g., *E. coli*) previously adapted to pH-neutral environments to survive in acidic ones.

The threat of antibiotic resistance is grave and imminent, according to the UK's equivalent to the US Surgeon General, Dame Sally Davies, who exhorted in January 2013 that an “antibiotic apocalypse” is looming and it is on a par with the peril associated with global climate change (Lallanilla 2013). This announcement came just six months after the World Health Organization (WHO) director-general Margaret Chan referred to a “global crisis in antibiotics” (Culp-Ressler 2013).

D. Bringing Bees to Their Knees?

Antibiotics aren't the only chemicals penetrating and endangering multiple parts of the food chain. Colony collapse disorder (CCD) has been described over the last eight years as a mysterious dying off of pollinators, particularly honey bees, in the US and Europe. This is a key thread in the intricate global food web because honey bees (and some other insects) pollinate the majority of the world's agricultural crops (i.e., fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds). Although it took a few years for investigators to identify the etiologic pathway of the bee die-off, it has recently been ascertained that the introduction of the now widely used class of pesticides known as neonicotinoids are largely responsible for CCD, in addition to the effects of climate change, food resource loss in over-farmed (likely monoculture) landscapes, and the dispersal or unintended introduction of foreign species and diseases (Chamberlain 2013a). The somewhat encouraging news on this front is that the European Union has enacted what is essentially a two-year moratorium on the use of neonicotinoids across the continent (Chamberlain 2013b). It should be interesting to see if the former colonies across the pond respond in kind after data gathering is completed. Bees, and other pollinators, are thought to be responsible for fertilizing about one-third of the world's crops, representing \$15 billion worth of crops in the US alone (Natural Resources Defense Council 2011). Roughly half of my diet is composed of foods that may be traced to these vital pollinators.

E. Uncle Sam Knows Best?

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is known for, among much else, issuing the admonition “the unexamined life is not worth living.” It may not be worth living, but an unexamined life is far less exhausting. But, if one concludes through the course of examining one's life and the countless ways in which one's life is sustained that conscientious food consumption is imperative, such a course may feel eminently more rewarding, serving as an evolving guide through life's various ethical and health choices.

Socrates, as recorded by Plato, may have known best. But does the billion-dollar beef industry? After

Oprah Winfrey won a high-profile lawsuit with Big Beef, which had a big beef with the billionaire and her guest, former cattle rancher Howard Lyman, the talk show host might not be so sure, though she felt that free speech prevailed. But the answer is a categorical ‘yes’ if we limit ourselves to maximizing profits, which is the primary intent of any industry. Knowing best for human health and the health of the planet is a far different, even diametrically opposed, proposition. As several writers have diligently documented, the decline in the quality of life for beef cattle over the last half-century has resulted from deplorable conditions better characterized as cruel confinement or concentration rather than living. It is patently clear that factory farming isn’t the answer when the question pertains to humane treatment of animals and the provision of the best quality foods, let alone meats, to the public.

Judging from the obesity statistics alone, if one is to fleetingly blame the victim, the American public, by and large, has difficulty making healthy food decisions. The food industry plays the role of avaricious enabler, plying the public with the cheapest-to-manufacture victuals aided and abetted by government collusion and subsidization. Grassroots movements oriented toward organic sustainable farming and healthy eating have made inroads, but not enough to stem the tide of several disturbing trends for public health and the health of the planet.

On a small scale, Sarah Conley has weighed in on the potential role of coercive paternalism related to the use of certain known vices in the food industry. She applauds the intrusion of the New York City government in banning trans-fats and laments only that the policy isn’t more broadly applied. She is dubious about a food stamp soda ban though, primarily because she thinks it would be ineffective. Further, on the broader notion of soda consumption, while she acknowledges the negative health effects of drinking soda, and that everyone would be better off drinking tap water, soda is sufficiently popular that banning it outright would also be ineffective. But she supports the idea of regulations to reduce portion sizes. Would an even broader coercive paternalism be appropriate to mitigate the colossal twin menaces of global climate change and antibiotic resistance, both of which are intimately related to the destructive methods employed in the modern food industries? Examples might include limiting meat portions, more stringent standards for raising livestock (e.g., further reductions in the use of antibiotics, which has gained some favor in the last two years), or even banning the use of animals entirely (which would obviously antagonize a huge swath of the population).

At best, the US can be said to have a spotty record with paternalism. On the positive side of the ledger, there is Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid, signed by Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, respectively. But unelected Gerald Ford pardoned the disgraced Richard Nixon, Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill chose “for the good of the country” not to pursue impeachment hearings of Ronald Reagan over the Iran/Contra scandal (the illegal sale of arms to embargoed Iran, the funds from which were funneled to support the Nicaraguan Contra insurgency), and Barack Obama, upon taking office, opted not to hold the previous presidential administration accountable for illegal wars and the curtailment of civil liberties (only to have his administration continue down that path itself). This is all to say that the US government has given precious little recent indication that it is truly inclined to act in the best interests of its citizens or citizens of the world. The folks who may be disposed to perform such genuine public service are few and far between in the government, individuals such as presidential contender Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), former congressman and presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), a vegetarian who had the temerity to call for a Department of Peace, and, perhaps Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), who has shown herself to be a champion of the people on the financial front. But just two years ago, legislation signed on the environmental front reinforces the widespread belief that the legislative and executive branches of the federal government cater to industry. Dubbed the “Monsanto Protection Act” by critics, a provision or rider written into the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013 by Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO), from Monsanto’s home state, stipulated that the US Department of Agriculture issue temporary permits allowing the continued planting of genetically modified organisms even after a court ruling finding that the USDA has made mistakes in its environmental impact review of the GMO in question. President Obama signed the Monsanto-backed legislation five days after the Senate version passed, on March 26.¹

In theory, a coercive paternalism, one that is altruistic in nature, could achieve more meaningful reform with much greater alacrity than grassroots movements, as encouraging as some of them are (e.g., the explosive growth of farmers' markets, much greater acceptance of vegetarianism and veganism, community supported agriculture). That is, with benevolent, truly democratic rulers in place, a transitional scheme might be set up by which people are first informed of the profoundly detrimental role that the cattle industry plays in terms of contributing to and exacerbating global climate change, not to mention poor human and bovine health and in conditions far inferior to traditional small family farms. Gradually, over the course of months, not years, the industry would be phased out, perhaps segueing first to a free range grass-fed rather than confined and grain-fed regimen. In practice, I cannot conceive of the US government biting off the hand that feeds it, namely billion-dollar corporations of many stripes. In fact, corporations pull government strings, lobbying successfully for what they want (and often involved in writing the legislation through intermediaries such as the American Legislative Exchange Council), and then playing the public off as compatriots when even a whiff of paternalistic or "nanny state" policy can be detected from the Beltway and enters what passes for public discourse in this era of budget-devastated, watered-down, celebrity-focused, crisis-chasing, attention-deficit, he said/she said journalism.

CONCLUSION

F. No One Is an Island, But Are We All on "Survivor"?

John Donne, English writer, lawyer and cleric in the late 1500s and early 1600s, once wrote, in "Meditation XVII," that "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Indeed, human beings are highly social and interdependent, with our various needs manifestly writ large in our international system of ensuring that (most) people are fed on a daily basis. As with the rampant fallibility that marks our species, innumerable inequities and unintended consequences mar the delivery and consumption of food and, worse, characterize the critical implications of maintaining what has devolved into the status quo. We may be eating ourselves to a slow, hot death.

Choosing what to eat remains a personal, though often public, act. At its core, government should have as little stake in this decision as it does in whom individuals choose to marry. But our private acts can often have repercussions beyond our control, affecting other people in the process. The personal, particularly one's palate and how to satisfy it, is deeply political. That is, our actions reveal our political biases or lack thereof, which also reflects where one stands on the political spectrum. Even indifference says something. I am not close to figuring out all of the dynamic reverberating effects related to all food choices. But I know that these are fundamental decisions that we make. We all have to eat. The seminal Greek physician Hippocrates is credited with having said, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." The majority of us do not treat food with such respect, unfortunately, with dire consequences for our own health, the many animals in the food chain, and the state of the earth. As for my relationship with food, I expect to strive to clean up any inconsistencies that crop up between my evolving thoughts and corresponding actions and to continue to seriously contemplate my food choices for my own health and that of my family, as well as the broader ramifications of such decisions for the planet. If a groundswell of people making concerted political choices in the supermarket, or better yet, farmers' markets emerges, public and planetary health would likely benefit. In the meantime, activism—whether focused on factory farms throughout the US, the GMOs of the borderless Monsanto, or child slavery on cocoa farms in Ghana and Ivory Coast—is an essential tool to better inform fellow citizens and a key adjuvant to the relative power of the wallet to force politicians to respond to the will and needs of the majority.

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